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ABSTRACT

The Library of Congress Subject Headings, a tool used almost exclusively by catalogers, currently is assuming equal importance in reference service as an aid for students and a unique tool for reference librarians. Most reference inquiries require the use of appropriate subject headings--an especially vital function for computer searches. The subject headings comprise an independent reference source to educate students about alternative subject headings which describe assigned study topics, providing a language of access to information. Librarians can use the Redbooks as an aid to the reference interview as they contribute to mutual understanding by student and librarian about the precise subject areas to be investigated. The Redbooks are also a valuable aid in the creation of library study guides for specific college courses, allowing analysis of course syllabi to reveal terminology, ideas, and instructions that can be converted to Library of Congress subject headings. Finally, they provide an anticipatory reference aid by which terms that describe a subject field can be assembled in advance. (Author/RAA)

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THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT HEADINGS REDBOOKS:

FOUNDATION OF REFERENCE

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THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT HEADINGS REDBOOKS: FOUNDATION OF REFERENCE

If reference librarians have not yet discovered the terminology gold mine called Library of Congress Subject Headings[1], perhaps it is time to pull this gem from the catalog closet. The source has been in our midst for a long time, yet its awesome potential might remain unrecognized by some librarians.

THE REDBOOKS AS INITIAL REFERENCE AID

Because the reference process simply cannot begin without the selection and utilization of subject headings which describe information, I propose this familiar source is perhaps the single most important initial aid for information service in the library. Not a bad little task for a title I met late in my career, since it has been traditionally a hidden cataloger's tool. I cannot conceive of performing good reference service without it. Indeed, there have been many instances where the reference process would have been impossible without the Redbooks as initiator.

Subject access to information is the theme of reference work. A subject field can neither be understood nor investigated without a knowledge of the terms which describe it. Accordingly, the Library of Congress Subject Headings' prime function in the reference process is to familiarize library users with the totality of subject headings, so they can learn to think in descriptors. Subject headings are their entree to information because they comprise the language of access.

Computer Application

A familiarization with the Redbooks, and the concomitant experience of studying and thinking in descriptors, are even more important when we consider a future of computer-generated information files. Students who desire computer-produced bibliographies will have to assemble precise descriptors and supply them to the information systems services. But before this is done they must

experience subject terminology to understand how information is organized and categorized relative to an outline of knowledge.

Beyond the Card Catalog

The reason for this article is my heady realization that the Redbooks are an independent reference source.

Think of the Redbooks initially as existing alone--far away from and unrelated to the card catalog. They are working tools which function primarily as a guide to the terminology of subject access. Guide must be emphasized here--especially for those who argue that the headings have no value beyond the mechanics of the catalog.

The Library of Congress Subject Headings' usefulness is not restricted to catalogers, the card catalog, or any library. For example, in addition to a particular card catalog, headings are found in other catalogs, periodical indexes and abstracts, newspaper indexes, tables of contents and indexes in books. They abound in reference sources: tables of contents, indexes, key-word-in-context lists, concordances, specialized thesauri of descriptors, indexes to collections, indexes to special topics, and subject bibliographies.

Although students will find many, they will not find, and should not expect to find, all the precise LC headings utilized in other sources. It is not important whether they locate initially terms which they feel are absolutely precise or correct. It is important they recognize there are great variations in the way information is labelled, and they have to locate and review alternative terminologies. Only then can they begin to decide what terms might be legitimate for their project.

So do not worry whether or not the Redbooks relate to any other library source. They are self-sufficient, versatile instructional tools. I consider them idea-books for librarians and students. Think of subject headings as word ideas, memory jogs, thought clues, reminders of other terms and examples of

subject variants--before you use them as keys to access. And the books are not absolute authorities; they are guides.

Pre-Access Subject Heading Review

A thorough knowledge of subject headings is vital because there is no universal agreement on how subject areas should be described. Anyone who has tried to find factual information on the most pedestrian topic has discovered the same subject can be described with different words, in different sources, by different authors.

We reference librarians know what happens to terms used in the same topic in reference sources covering several years. They change with the calendar, they ebb and flow; some are dropped, others reappear. Also, the same material may be described by a very narrow term in one source; in another it may be combined with related information under a very broad term. As we know from the card catalog, two or more headings may describe a single source and our perception about what they should be may not agree with the Library of Congress. The same subject heading may be used in different sources to cover different material--or different aspects of the same subject.

Because these frustrations of terminology pervade most library materials, users may have to redefine continuously their search methodology and manipulate some new or different subject headings for every source. Therefore, I often suggest that students begin their information search with the Redbooks.

The interdisciplinary consideration is a modern reason for a good knowledge of descriptors. Students should understand that topics are not thought-islands. Most subjects do not stand alone. They are related ultimately to other fields on superior,subordinate or similar levels. Therefore, a knowledge of subject headings is becoming more important because so many fields cross subject lines.

It is important for students to know that because of the interdisciplinary

nature of fields and sources, and the attendant problem of assigning precise subject headings to describe them, any preliminary topic survey should include those areas (some broad and others more specific) in which relevant information will most likely be found.

A brief review of terminology should be made before the attempt at access. This is an alternative to the conventional racing around the card catalog, the pulling and pushing and perusal of drawers in some trial -and-error ritual in search of the correct heading. Subject headings have to be put down on paper, examined in a group, and used throughout the search process. I suggest students begin a checklist of subject headings (or key words)--the terms, broad, narrow, or related, which define or describe the topic. When the initial sources are checked,new terms will be found. They are added to the list and all are then used in subsequent searches.

Education about Alternatives

The Library of Congress subject headings are an important educational tool which extends beyond their function as a grand list of labels. They comprise, in fact, an intriguing index of knowledge. Students need to see where their topic fits into this framework and how it relates to other topics.

The subject headings serve as indicators of topic specificity, scope, and size within a vast hierarchy. They illustrate the structure of information and introduce the student to the vocabulary of subject fields; this includes alternative terms under which related information might be found.

The alternative terms can be as specific, more specific, or more general than the main headings under which they are listed. This hierarchy of specificity allows a student to understand the scope of a field through the terms which describe it. They can see clearly that while the topic under investigation is itself composed of many parts, it is also part of something larger. All these facets--parts, topic, and whole--can be utilized in the search process. This

perspective and analysis of a subject's access language is invaluable to the searcher; the RB's are the guide.

Unfortunately, the Library of Congress labels many books as if they were shorter works, so they appear first to be more general than they really are. (It has always bothered me that a 600 page book can be given 2 subject headings, and a 20 page periodical given 6). Students are then forced into inductive reasoning at the catalog; the complex (collection of specific subjects) is reduced to the simple (one or two general subjects), which is then chosen or discarded en masse.

The ''cannot see the forest for the trees'' cliche is very apt here. Students are sometimes so concerned with initially finding specialized sources with precise subject access that they overlook the more general sources. Yet, in many libraries the broader sources may be more plentiful, and contain, collectively, much more specialized information than a few narrowly-termed titles. There may, in fact, be more and better information on glaciers in several books labelled ''geology'' than in a few labelled''glaciers''. By eliminating the more general sources because of subject headings stubborness, you can miss a world of good information. The Redbook terms remind us that specific topic information can be found in sources described only by general headings.

This is a perfect example of how a restricted understanding of subject headings--not to mention an unfamiliarity with the structure of sources--can mislead the searcher. Indeed, some of the card catalog's headings can unwittingly ''lie'' about a source's contents, as the correlation between headings and the titles they allegedly represent is sometimes appallingly oblique. The fact that library users can be easily misled by some subject headings supports the importance of reviewing a variety of subject approaches for complete information access.

The Descent to Terms and Topics

An awareness of wholes and parts revealed by the L.C. subject headings

helps a student identify also the complexity of a subject and the necessity for adjusting it to a manageable size for a term paper or project. Because the information found constantly influences a topic, it must often be broadened or narrowed. Sometimes it may have to be changed to a related (or even new) one for which there is more information.

The interactivity between source materials and subject terms during the information hunt can be likened to the cautious descent and landing of the moon landing craft. The following analogy describes my thought processes when perusing the Redbooks for subject headings which correspond to the first conception of a topic.

A specific location is chosen in advance. This is where we would like to land, but things along the way might influence our decision. As we get closer to the goal, and begin to see the general area for the first time, we are advised to hover and view the proposed target in relation to its surroundings. A precise landing on the target may be feasible, yet the nature of the terrain might dictate an alternative site, and we have to be prepared to get there.

The information search works the same way. We begin with curiosity about a topic of interest. It is labelled with a specific subject heading and initial information is accessed. While the information found may support the topic, it may also influence it, or even change it, and necessitate other headings to describe the subject variants. Our goal may have to be changed due to the limitation of information to effectively support it.

The pulsating circle of light from a theater spotlight illustrates also the way terms and information are viewed while they are gathered and examined. The scope of a topic expands and contracts continually from source to source; these broad and narrow perspectives are reflected in the subject headings

which describe them.

The utilization of source materials and manipulation of subject headings are collateral functions. A change in one is reciprocated by the other.

This complex process is greatly facilitated by a thorough advance review of the LC Subject Headings Books. Here you can see the total access picture: the structure and interrelationships of subject headings in a single easy-to-use source.

THE REDBOOKS AS WORKING TOOLS

The use of headings in many sources, however, is only one obvious illustration of the Redbooks' function as a guide. Naturally they can tell us where (under what terms) information might be found. More importantly, however, is the not-so-obvious function--how the Redbooks themselves can be used.

Their versatility and importance are illustrated by these three functions: a clarification aid in the reference interview, a source for the creation of bibliography-study guides, an anticipatory reference tool.

Reference Interview Aid

I have discovered the RB's are a constructive aid in the reference interview because they serve often as a corrective to inaccurately posed requests. We reference librarians know that students are finding it increasingly difficult to communicate their information needs. This runs the gamut from ''I don't know what I want; maybe you do!'' to a flagging attempt at describing in words concepts which may be very clear in their minds. Also, students request information, using so called 'natural' or 'popular' language; this does not always mesh with the correct language of access.

Therefore, it is gratifying to see students' satisfaction when they spot in the headings list the term or expression which describes what they

really want--terminology they could neither recall nor communicate on their own.

This function emphasizes again the importance of the RB's as an initial aid, since correct decisions about subject headings will help to clarify the direction taken in the reference process.

Aid in the Creation of Library Guides

The Redbooks are an essential first step in the construction of bibliographies-study guides for the teaching faculty. They are used to get a feel for the language of access based on the subject matter.

The process begins with an examination of the course syllabi. I look beyond the course title and description for key words in source titles, lists of topics covered in class, instructions for special assignments, projects and papers. The terms reflect the specific interests of the teacher and outline collectively the scope of the course.

These terms are then ''plugged into'' the Redbooks. Main headings and the ''see also'' references are examined; the appropriate latter terms can be checked also as main headings. As this process is repeated, three things will emerge: a pattern of subject linkage, a structure of terminology, and an arbitrary boundary beyond which the descriptor search obviously should not go.

The result is a working outline of descriptors which reflect the curriculum. Some or all are used for the location of selected sources for an introductory bibliography. Most important, however, the refined subject headings list can be retained and included in a printed study guide as an information access aid.

In this case the Redbooks provide a dual function. They are a working tool for the librarian and an access tool for the student.

These three excerpts from study guides illustrate the Redbooks are a unique working tool with important application:

1. Check the subject card catalog under these headings for information related to study about The Family in History:

Afro-American families
Family (and its appropriate subdivisions)
Family in literature
Family life surveys
Social history
U.S. -- Statistics
Youth -- U.S. -- History

--And subdivisions ''--Social conditions'' and ''--Social life and customs'' which follow countries, states, cities, and ethnic groups, e.g.; U.S.--Social conditions, New York (City)--Social life and customs, Afro-Americans--Social conditions.

These terms were chosen for The Family in History course. Note, the subdivisions are included because they relate more to the topic than the terms to which they are subordinate. The descriptors reflect the needs of students and the recommendations of the professor for a specific block of study.

2. --Check the subject card catalog under these headings for information related to the study of Social Theory:

Alienation (Social psychology)
Authority
Community
Community life
Functional Analysis (Social sciences)
Historical sociology
Philosophy
Political science - History
Political sociology
Social conflict
Social ethics
Social evolution
Social interaction
Social sciences (and subdivisions)
Social structure
Social systems
Social values
Sociology (and subdivisions)
Sociology, Urban

--And subdivisions: ''--Social conditions'' which follow countries, states, cities, and ethnic groups, e.g.: U.S. -- Social conditions; ''--Social aspects'' and ''--Sociological aspects'', e.g.: Hospitals -- Sociological aspects and Automobiles -- Social aspects.

--And names of Philosophers or Sociologists.

Here is a useful subject approach to a complex field. Again, this list reflects either the course outline's terminology or the Library of Congress' correct equivalent headings. Students feel more comfortable when they realize some terms in their syllabi are also legitimate LC subject headings.

3.--Selected Subject Headings for Adolescence Study

Below are seven topic areas and some Library of Congress terms under which associated sources can be searched in the subject card catalog, books' indexes and tables of contents, and indexes to periodicals.

When you check headings in the card catalog, make sure the source corresponds with your specific needs. Sometimes a heading carries more than one meaning and applies to different, unwanted aspects of a topic--or even to another field. Always review sources by checking subject headings in their indexes and tables of contents; the card catalog is never a substitute for an examination of books.

1. The Nature of Adolescence

Adolescence
Adolescent boys
Adolescent girls
Adolescent Psychology
Developmental Psychology
Youth

2. Physical

Anatomy, Human
Body image
Drugs and youth
Generative organs, Female
Growth
Puberty
Sex

3. Emotional

Difference (Psychology)
Emotional maturity
Identity
Identity (Psychology)
Individuality
Maturation (Psychology)
Self
Self-evaluation
Self-perception
Self-respect

4. Social

Attitude (Psychology)
Influence (Psychology)
Social perception
Socialization

5. Moral

Conduct of life
Conformity
Ethics
Social values
Values

6. Familial

Children - Management
Collective settlements
Conflict of generations
Family
Family life education
Kinship
Marriage
Parent and child

7. Educational and Vocational

Cognition
Cognition in children
Finance, personal
Vocational guidance

In this instance the professor supplied an outline (the numbered items), and subject headings applicable to the course contents were selected for each outline topic. This list illustrates well there are many expressions which students do not recognize as legitimate headings. They are surprised often that headings can combine two topics, can be so specific, can exist at all.

Anticipatory Reference Aid

The Redbooks' usefulness is not limited to the construction of study guides to improve access to information in support of specific course curricula. They can be used also as a librarian-initiated advance service aid.

Reference librarians know there are certain kinds of high-frequency inquiries to which we always respond inadequately due to a lack of time. We painstakingly redo the same searches and are consequently unable to advance the quality or amount of information. Therefore, the Redbooks can be used as an anticipatory reference tool for the creation of an outline of subject headings for selected fields of study. The resuit is students and faculty can benefit from a quantity and quality of descriptors discovered and assembled in advance. Source titles and other information can be included also, of course (they were included in the study guides described above). Whatever the objective is, the Redbooks are an instrument which can subsequently free up reference librarians for more unique requests.

This list serves as an introduction to ethnic studies--a subject heading - idea checklist for the student unfamiliar with the field and its language:

Race and Ethnic Relations Subject Headings

Acculturation
Assimilation (Sociology)
Civil Rights
Discrimination
Discrimination in Education
Discrimination in Employment
Discrimination in Housing
Discrimination in Public Accommodations
Emigration and Immigration
Ethnic Attitudes
Ethnic Barriers
Ethnic Groups
Ethnic Wit and Humor
Ethnocentrism
Ethnology
Intercultural Education
Minorities
Prejudices and Antipathies
Race
Race (Theology)
Race Awareness
Race Discrimination
Race Relations
Racism
Segregation
Social Groups
Social Integration
Social Problems
Socialization

This list, constructed for Special Education students, has proved extremely helpful for a field which is difficult to search in the card catalog:

Special Education Subject Headings in the Subject Card Catalog

Ability
Aphasia
Aphasic Children
Aphasic Children - Education
Blind - Education
Brain-Damaged Children - Education
Children, Blind - Education
Children, Deaf - Education
Communicative Disorders in Children
Deaf - Education
Dyslexia
Emotional Problems of Children
Exceptional Children - Education
Gifted Children - Education
Handicapped Children - Education
Handicapped - Education
Learning Ability
Mentally Handicapped children-Education
Mentally Handicapped - Education
Mentally Ill Children - Education
Physically Handicapped Children-Education
Problem Children - Education
Reading Disability
Reading - Remedial Teaching
Slow Learning Children
Socially Handicapped Children-Education
Socially Handicapped - Education
Speech Disorders in Children
Teachers of Brain-Damaged Children
Teachers of Exceptional Children
Teachers of Handicapped Children
Teachers of Mentally Handicapped Children
Teachers of Socially Handicapped Children
Teachers of the Blind
Teachers of the Deaf

To the student unfamiliar with a particular field, such lists provide an even greater dividend. They serve as an introduction to a field through the terms which make it accessible. They illustrate a field's scope by the facets of which it is composed. They act even as a basic topic outline, admittedly somewhat crude, but legitimate for a start. The lists tell the novice very clearly some of the many topics of which ethnic studies and Special Education are concerned. Students can see at a glance a number of possible choices for investigation--including ideas for term projects. The success of these efforts illustrates the importance of headings lists for future projects, whether constructed by librarians or by students.

CRITICISM AND CAUTION

A reasonable criticism might be: ''Why don't you use the card catalog the way it is 'supposed' to be used. The Redbooks have fulfilled their function. Forget about them.'' The answer, as I have illustrated throughout, is that some have a limited view of '' their function''; they miss the big picture.

In my opinion, the success accomplished with the Redbooks when applied to the card catalog proves conclusively the latter's inadequacy when used alone. The books have suggested terms that would never have been found through conventional use of the catalog. In contrast, when the books are used as auxiliary keys, the catalog's potential is dramatically expanded. Moreover, the Redbooks can be utilized for their own sake--independent of the catalog.

Caution must be exercised if the Redbooks are to be used properly, as students unfamiliar with the source could find it detrimental to the search process as applied to the card catalog. The books are initially a librarian's tool, to be used by students only after librarians' assistance.

The base volumes and the supplements become dated. Unless they are annotated they are neither a direct key to any card catalog nor an index to any collection. I have said none of this matters, of course, but students need to understand why. The books are an imperfect guide, but compared to the alternative--nothing--they are absolutely essential.

There may be a two-volume sleeping giant in your library. If he is wakened you might be surprised at the discovery that something was missing: your foundation of reference.

1. United States. Library of Congress. Subject Cataloging Division. Library of Congress Subject Headings. 9th ed. 2 vols. U.S. Library of Congress, 1980.

The end.